

The Price of Character

Breaking Up Stony Ground, Part 3

Joshua 9

I can still remember being stunned at the cashier's counter at Lowe's many years ago when our children were young.

We had put up a wooden swing set in the backyard and it had an extra-long support beam overhead – with room to hang one of those wooden porch swings.

So off to the store I went to purchase a kit and I planned to put the swing together on my own.

When I rolled my cart up to the got up to the counter with this swing, the cashier said, "Oh, I bought one of those swings about a week ago." I said, "Really, how's it holding up?" I realized, that's the wrong thing to ask somebody, "Like, how's it holding up under the strain." She just laughed and said it was "Holding up just fine."

When she handed me the receipt she said, "I gotta tell you something," and she kind of leaned over the counter and whispered; "The directions call for twelve bolts." I said, "Okay," you know, why are we whispering here? She said, "But there's only ten in the box."

"Oh," I said, "thank you for telling me . . . I hate buying something you gotta put together and you're missing that one piece that holds everything else together.

So I said, "Why don't you hold the box here and let me run back and get two bolts." We're talking about eighteen cents.

She said, "No, no, no. You only need ten."

I thought, okay, she's trying to help me out when I get confused later on . . . the directions call for twelve bolts, but there's only ten, but you only need ten." Got it.

Then she said, "So what you do when you get home is put it all together, bring the directions back, tell the manager, 'The directions called for twelve bolts and I only got 10.' And you'll get two free bolts."

Wow! 18 cents. I can put my children through college now.

I couldn't believe it. I was wondering why she was telling me all this.

She rang it up and then said, "There's one more thing." I'm looking around now to see if anybody from Colonial is in there . . . who thinks I might know this woman. I don't.

She said, "You've got to stain this swing if you want it to last." I said, "Yea, I could tell that from the picture on the box . . . I'm good with pictures."

She said, "Well, it'll only take a quart of stain, but we only sell it by the gallon. So do what I did . . . you buy a gallon, take it home . . . take the lid off . . . carefully . . . paint your swing, and then put the lid back on, real careful like . . . bring it back, say you never opened it and get a refund."

A gallon costs around 10 bucks.

I couldn't believe this . . . why in the world did I pick her lane?

As I was walking back to my pick-up truck, I remembered something that my father would often say to us boys as we were growing up – in a variety of different settings – and I found myself saying the same thing – "My character is worth more than 18 cents and a gallon of stain."

What that woman had actually done – without realizing it – was inform a total stranger that her integrity was worth no more than 10 dollars and some change.

How much is your integrity worth? Are you in the process of selling it? And, if you are, let me ask you, how much are you getting for it?

- Are you getting a sales contract out it?
- A promotion or some kind of praise from your boss at work?
- Some office supplies to use at home?
- Maybe it's a better score on your exam or term paper?

Frankly, there is an epidemic of dishonesty sweeping around the world. It will more impact more people than Ebola or the flu virus will ever touch.

And sadly, Christians are as likely as non-Christians to have this besetting sin – this ever ready besetting sin – wrap it around their ankles and trip them up.

- Falsifying income tax returns
- Committing plagiarism
- Bribing someone to get a permit
- Ignoring construction specifications
- Copying a computer program or DVDⁱ

One author wrote, unless we battle dishonesty, we will return to deceit like a duck returns to water.ⁱⁱ

What's written on the price tag of your integrity? How much is your character worth?

For our study, let's define it positively with one word – integrity.

What I want to do is define it . . . cross reference it . . . make some observations about it and then watch as it is demonstrated in the life of an Old Testament believer.

And let me say right up front – defining integrity is easy; demonstrating integrity just might be the greatest challenge of your life.

I found it interesting in my study to learn that the 10 top searches online – this year – for the definition of an English word – included the search to define the word, integrity.

Literally millions of people were looking up the meaning of this word.

And if you go to the dictionary, you discover that the word means, to be honest – free from corruption.

Webster defined it as moral uprightness.

In the Old Testament, the word finds its root in the Hebrew word thom, which signifies completeness . . . in other words, there's nothing hidden or missing.

It's interesting that the High Priest was to wear a decorative breastplate called thummim – which is

the plural form of this word – it could be translated “perfections” . . . or integrities.

When he appeared in formal service, he wore the Urim and Thummim. Urim means lights and Thummim means integrities – they were a part of his breastplate – many scholars believe the Urim and Thummim were precious gems or stones kept in an inner pouch inside the breastplate of the High Priest.

The Lord commanded that when Aaron stood before the Lord, he was to wear these over his heart. (Exodus 28:30).

No High Priest could approach God without his heart symbolically covered by integrity.

I think we have a wonderful New Testament analogy – since we are all priests, able to stand before God and represent God to our world – we stand in His presence, wearing over our hearts the breastplate of righteousness (Ephesians 6:14); and we battle sin in the world with this breastplate covering our hearts – our hearts are covered as it were with light and integrity.ⁱⁱⁱ

If you cross reference this Hebrew root word you discover that integrity:

1. Is a defining characteristic of Holy scripture

David wrote, the law of the Lord is perfect (Psalm 19:7) – there's that word – complete – whole – without corruption.

The word of God is the word of integrity.

2. Secondly, integrity is a part of a godly testimony

Job insisted, even though suffering, *“Till I die, I will not put away my integrity from me (Job 27:5).*

David wrote in *Psalm 101:2, I will walk with integrity of heart within my house.*

Which is another way of saying, “I will keep my word to those closest to me.”

Integrity means;

- You'll keep your vows to your wife or husband;
- You'll keep your word to your children – if you promise them you'll show up, you'll show up. When they hear you talking to someone on the phone, they'll know that what you're saying is the truth;
- When you borrow tools from your neighbor, you'll return them; you're not waiting for the year of jubilee to wipe out all of your debts.

- If you shake someone’s hand on a deal, those who know you best know you mean it.
- When you sign on for a ministry assignment, you carry your weight and finish the job.

Everybody knew Cecil Brenton was a Christian mechanic. Not because he had fish symbols on his garage door or on the front of his business cards, but because he said he was a Christian and his business practices backed it up.

In 1972 a reporter from the Toronto Star visited thirteen garages with a car in perfect condition except for one loose spark plug wire. He wanted to do a story on the integrity of auto mechanic industry, so he made no mention of who he was.

Out of all the mechanics he visited, all of them squeezed cash out of him one way or another, claiming this problem or that.

All of them, except one – Cecil Brenton. He told the reporter that it was nothing more than a loose spark plug wire – which took less than a minute to fix – and there was no charge.

When the reporter pressed him for some reason behind his honesty, he simply responded, “Because I’m a Christian.” After the story ran in the paper, drivers flocked to Mr. Brenton’s service station where he worked 12 more years before retiring.

Ten years later, Cecil Brenton died from cancer and the Toronto Star reported his passing with a separate and full article under the headline, “Cecil Brenton, 89: Christian Mechanic” known for integrity.^{iv}

Nobody who read that article needed to look up the word . . . do a google search . . . they knew what it meant.

Let me make one more cross reference of this word.

Not only is integrity a defining characteristic of the Bible and a part of a believer’s testimony . . .

3. Third, integrity is a quality of true leadership

Asaph writes a history of Israel that runs throughout *Psalms 78* and he includes this interesting statement about King David in *verse 72* – *So he shepherded them (Israel) according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them with skillful hands.*

Your translation might read with an upright heart . . . it’s this same word for integrity.

It’s tragic to see so many political administrations brought before ethics committees; in a 4 year Congressional evaluation of ethics, one report revealed that among those sitting senators and representatives:

- 19 of them were caught writing bad checks
- 3 of them were arrested for assault
- 8 were caught shoplifting
- 14 were arrested on drug related charges
- 29 of them were charged with spousal abuse
- and 84 of them were arrested for driving drunk.

In the highest reaches of political power, integrity has been rushed into the intensive care unit . . . and we’re not sure it’s going to make it!

The average citizen lives with a sense of suspicion regarding those in power.

The chaplain of the Kansas Senate made it into the news when he prayed several years ago:

Omniscient Father

Help us to know who is telling the truth.

One side tells us one thing, and the other just the opposite.

If neither side is telling the truth, we would like to know that too.

And if each side is telling half the truth,

Give us the wisdom to put the right halves together.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.^v

The Apostle Paul uses a synonym for integrity that is most often translated blamelessness.

He lists it first and foremost in the qualifications of those who will serve as elders; honesty is a predominant characteristic for both deacons and elders in the church according to 1 Timothy 3.

Men who lead should be men of integrity.

If their handshake doesn’t matter, the very confidences of those who follow them are undercut.

A man, or woman, of integrity doesn’t put on a show . . . they are the same, in the dark, as they are in the light.

Let me show you an illustration of integrity from someone who would have been applauded for violating it.

Turn to the Old Testament Book of *Joshua and chapter 9*.

While you’re turning, let me set the scene for you.

Joshua is leading the Israelites into the Promised Land. But just because it was promised, didn’t mean

they wouldn't have to conquer it. It was filled with idolatrous, God hating, child sacrificing kingdoms.

With the help of God, the people of Israel would conquer this land, one battle at a time.

The Lord miraculously parted the waters of the Jordan and the people of Israel marched across on dry land. They encountered Jericho and, again, God fought the battle for them by miraculously collapsing the city walls as the Israelites shouted in faith.

The news spread of course . . . kings quickly formed coalitions and drew up in battle array.

According to the plan of God, the 7 Canaanite nations living in the land were to be killed. Deuteronomy 20 informs us that they were unrepentant idolaters confirmed in their rebellion against God and they were to be judged by Israel.

However, people groups and nations beyond their land could form peaceful covenants with the nation Israel, if they chose.

With that in mind, notice how one nearby city came up with an ingenuous plan – **verse 3. *But when the inhabitants of Gideon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, they on their part acted with cunning and went and made ready provisions and took worn-out sacks from their donkeys, and wineskins, worn-out and torn and mended, with worn-[out, patched sandals on their feet and worn out clothes.*** (Sounds a lot like your college years, doesn't it). **Verse 6. *And they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and to the men of Israel, "We have come from a distant country, so now make a covenant with us." But the men of Israel said to the Hivites, "Perhaps you live among us; then how can we make a covenant with you?"*** 8. ***They said to Joshua, "We are your servants." And Joshua said to them, "Who are you? And where do you come from?"*** 9. ***They said to him, "From a very distant country your servants have come; because of the name of the Lord you God. For we have heard a report of him, and all that he did in Egypt –***

Look down at verse 11 – So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country said to us, "Take provisions in your hand for the journey and go and meet them and say to them "We are your servants. Come now, make a covenant with us." 12. Here is our bread. It was still warm when we took it from our houses as our food for the journey on the day we set out to come to you, but now, behold, it is dry and crumbly. 13. These wineskins were new when we filled them, and behold, they have burst. And

these garments and sandals of ours are worn out from the very long journey."

14. So the men took some of their provisions, but did not ask counsel from the Lord. 15. And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them.

Now notice the discovery is made in **verse 16. *At the end of three days after they had made a covenant with them, they heard that they were their neighbors and that they lived among them.***

The city of Gibeon was located 6 miles from Jerusalem.^{vi}

In other words, Joshua and the people of Israel discovered that these particular Gibeonites didn't live 6 weeks away or even 6 days away, they lived less than 6 hours away . . . from what would become the capital city of Jerusalem.

I can imagine, before the ink ever dried on that peace treaty, the Gibeonites were around the corner and double over in laughter – clapping each other on the back – “Can you believe we pulled it off? And that Joshua . . . oh man, is he ever inexperienced?! Are they all naïve or what?”

Now the real question becomes – what is Joshua going to do once he finds how he's been deceived? What's going to happen to his promise then? Hey, that peace treaty is just a piece of paper, right?

Not according to Joshua and the other leaders. Notice **verse 18. *But the people of Israel did not attack them, because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel.***

And don't miss this little commentary – **verse 18b. *Then all the congregation – that is, the entire Israelite nation – murmured against the leaders.***

And Joshua is the leader of these leaders, so he's at the tip of the spear. He's now in a lose-lose situation. And the entire nation is willing and ready to restore his credibility in battle.

And Joshua says, “No.” Are you kidding? We're not going to destroy these people?

Joshua is now stuck in the middle – he's literally defending those who made a fool of him – skip over to **verse 26 – *So he (Joshua) did this to them and delivered them out of the hand of the people of Israel, and they did not kill them.***

In other words, Joshua had done something wrong – he hadn't asked the Lord's advice before signing this peace treaty; he'd only looked at their hands; he didn't ask the Lord for wisdom regarding their hearts.

And now he faces an incredible test of integrity. Will he break his promise, will he do one more wrong thing to try and make everything right?

No matter what most of the people around him urged him to do, he and the other leaders refused to break a sacred treaty and nullify their oath, even though it made their lives miserable.

Have you ever thought about the fact that most of the justification behind our lying and dishonesty and the breaking of vows and the violation of promises . . . is to make our lives better . . . easier . . . to eliminate pressure . . . to move from unpopularity to popularity.

We rarely want to suffer from being honest.

Kent Hughes writes about being a victim of integrity.

Maybe you've lost a job or a client or a friend or a passing grade or a boyfriend or some amount of money because you were honest.

Hughes wrote about his daughter and son-in-law and their three children who went for months without adequate housing in Vienna, Austria because housing was scarce, but the major problem was that landlords who had housing demanded they sign their lease, falsely claiming to pay less for the rent than they actually had to pay. This way the owners could report less revenue and cheat on their taxes. Hughes writes, "My daughter and her family are at this point victims of their integrity."^{vii}

Joshua is a victim of his unwillingness to break his promise. He is willing to suffer a major drop in the polls . . . and defend enemies he'd rather eliminate . . . because of his integrity.

So what did he do?

Well, he gave them their request . . . they had asked to be the servants of Israel, and Joshua fulfilled that request as he allowed them to live.

Notice *verse 27. Joshua made them that day cutters of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and – notice this – for the altar of the Lord, to this day, in the place that he should choose.*

Most Old Testament scholars I read see in this Joshua's commitment to the gospel of God's grace.

Joshua's assignment would keep the Gibeonites idolatry from ever taking hold since their work would be carried out in connection with the tabernacle. But it was more than that – their work would expose them directly to the worship of the one true and living God.^{viii}

Joshua's integrity effectively exposed these people to the glory and grace of God.

The influence of Joshua's testimony doesn't end here in this passage.

If you track them through the Old Testament you discover:

- The Gibeonites will refuse to follow many rebellious Israelites back into idolatry, years later.
- After the nation Israel is divided, David places the tabernacle in Gibeon for safe keeping.
- 500 years before the birth of Christ, during the leadership of Zerubbabel, the genealogies record that among those who longed to return from exile to Jerusalem were the Gibeonites
- One of the more fascinating lines in Israel's history and the public commitment of the Gibeonites is the record of Nehemiah's own journal. When Nehemiah returned to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, who would volunteer to help him – the Gibeonites join him and complete the reconstruction of their former home.

Their forefathers had been deceivers . . . but their deception had been overwhelmed by a man of integrity . . . and a lineage of faithful service to God had begun.

Have you ever thought about the fact that you are surrounded by Gibeonites . . . do they know who you are?

Can they trust your word?

Can they count on your commitments . . . your promises . . . your work ethic . . . your honesty?

I got a letter from a man recently who has just been released from prison. While incarcerated, he'd become an avid listener to Wisdom for the Heart – and had been for some time corresponding with that ministry. His name is Bryan and he wrote, "After 21 years, 8 months and 1 day, I finally made it out of the Texas prison. My how the world has changed – why does everyone constantly stare at their mobile phone? There is definitely an adjustment phase, but I'm prepared for that because of my solid foundation in Jesus Christ.

I want to thank you for all the free materials you sent me over the years which gave me solid biblical ground to stand on.

[It wasn't long before I was tempted to compromise my integrity] A few days ago I took my written computer driving exam. I passed . . . barely. The customer service rep scheduled me for a

driving test one week away and the excused me to leave. I said, ‘Wait, what about a permit that allows me to practice driving?’

She said, “That’ll cost you \$11 dollars . . . listen, it’s only a week away . . . why don’t you just save yourself the money and practice without anybody being the wiser?”

I responded, “No way . . . I’m going to practice doing the right things for the right reasons even if it costs me a little more – I’m not doing that again.”

That’s another way of him saying, “Listen, my character is worth far more than 11 bucks.”

Way to go.

Integrity is worth more than a driver’s license, unless you earn it fair and square.

I have heard it said, but can’t remember from whom – but I think of it often . . . “Every day, every believer faces a test of integrity.”

It’s a test that never takes a semester off . . . or a holiday . . . it’ll be waiting for you tomorrow, in some form or another.

Let me close our study with yet another prayer from the Puritan Collection of Prayer entitled, The Valley of Vision

Let this be our prayer as we prepare to face another week of temptation . . . and battle . . . and opportunity;

*Almighty God,
As I cross the threshold of another day
I commit myself to thy care . . . incline my heart to
thy ways; mold me wholly into the image of Jesus as
a potter forms clay;
Make my lips a well-tuned harp to [sing] thy praise;
Let those around me (let me add – all those
Gibeonites)
See me living by thy Spirit; unconfirmed to lying
vanities;
Clad in the entire armor of God (let me add –
especially the breastplate of righteousness);
Showing holiness in all my doings;
May I view all things in the mirror of eternity;
Order this day all my communications according to
thy wisdom,
And to the gain of mutual good.
May I speak each word as if my last word,
And walk each step as my final one;
If my life should end this day,
Let this be my best day.
Amen.^{ix}*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/5/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from R. Kent Hughes, Disciplines of a Godly Man (Crossway, 1991), p. 121

ii Ibid, p. 122

iii Adapted from, Ted W. Engstrom, Integrity (Word Books, 1987), p. 12

iv Adapted from Mark DeMoss, The Little Red Book of Wisdom (Thomas Nelson, 2007), p. 112

v Hughes, p. 119

vi The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament, Editors; John Walvoord & Roy Zuck (Victor Books, 1985), p. 348

vii Hughes, p. 125

viii Bible Knowledge Commentary, p. 349

ix Adapted from The Valley of Vision, Edited by Arthur Bennett (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), p. 220